



Taking on the Big Boys: Why Feminism is Good for Families, Business and the Nation

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In 1992, a dozen Chinese seamstresses were laid off from their jobs making sleeves, collars and piecework for Lucky Sewing, a subcontractor for Jessica McClintock, a company that manufactures Gunne Sax dresses. When Jessica McClintock pulled its contract from Lucky Sewing, the subcontractor declared bankruptcy and told the women, who had been working 10 to 14 hours a day, six or seven days a week, that it couldn't pay them back wages.

The women approached the Asian Immigrants Worker Advocates in Oakland, Calif. and got involved in a campaign that became a model for anti-sweatshop organizing. They visited a Jessica McClintock boutique in San Francisco and saw that the dresses they had been paid about \$5 to make were selling for nearly \$200. Outraged, the women wrote letters to McClintock, organized rallies and launched a boycott of McClintock. After media coverage in the *New York Times* and CBS's *Sixty Minutes*, the AIWA and the company reached an agreement. Jessica McClintock donated money to establish a fund for workers to learn their rights, sponsored scholarships for garment workers, and established a hotline for workers to report labor violations.

This success story is just one of many in Ellen Bravo's new book, *Taking on the Big Boys: Why Feminism is Good for Families, Business and the Nation*. Like the Chinese seamstresses, many women aren't accustomed to being listened to, especially by people in power. But Bravo shows that doesn't have to be the case. She hopes her book will redefine people's idea of what it means to be political, and let them know that ordinary women can effect change -- because, when they do, everyone benefits.

"I want people to know that anyone can be an activist," she said. "And that doesn't have to mean, although it can, being at big demonstrations with thousands of people."
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An activist doesn't have to have a bullhorn, Bravo added. They just need to be willing to speak out when they see injustice.

"People know what the problems are," she said. "It's that they don't know what they can do. They don't see themselves as agents of change."

Bravo, a longtime director of 9to5 National Association of Working Women, gives strategies in her new book for achieving pay equity, getting family leave and valuing women's work outside the workplace. In her book, Bravo makes a case for feminism and how economic equality will make things better for everyone. "To achieve that, we have to do more than smash the glass ceiling," she writes. "We have to redesign

the building."

Bravo says that those in power fight change through various means such as minimizing the problem or what she calls catastrophizing it -- if women are paid equal to men, capitalism will collapse!! In the book she shatters some common myths such as the gap between men and women's pay closing on its own and women getting paid less because they aren't as good of negotiators as men. The reality is not that women's earnings have gone up, but men's have dropped, Bravo says. As for women needing to learn to ask for more, Bravo says that in many cases women are given no room to negotiate at all -- they are simply told what the pay is.

Bravo also takes on the myth that there are so few women in top-paying jobs because women are opting out of the workplace to raise children. The reality, she says, is that inflexible work environments and unreasonable hours force women out. Reframing the discussion on the "Mommy Wars" was a big part of the reason Bravo wrote this book.

"The more visible we make the issue, the better," she said. "We all need to work together on this and stop letting the Big Boys compartamentalize us."

Bravo says there have definitely been positive steps in terms of women's rights, some very visible. Hillary Clinton is a viable presidential candidate, Nancy Pelosi won Speaker of the House and Harvard appointed its first woman president, Drew Gilpin Faust. It's important to celebrate the victories, Bravo says -- and keep working for change.

There is hope for systemic changes in how women are treated, Bravo says. She points to three cultural shifts that make her think this type of change is possible.

"The use of the word Ms. is now commonplace," she said. "It was used as a joke when the magazine started. Tobacco is another one. It was unthinkable 20 years ago that you'd have to go outside to smoke."

The third change is the use of the term African American, Bravo said: "When it first started people said it was awkward. Now we don't even think about it."

Bravo points to the 1980 movie "9 to 5," which took its title and some of its ideas from the organization Bravo headed. Clerical workers played by Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton are relentlessly harassed, demeaned and unappreciated by their boss until they kidnap him and create a humane workplace with childcare, flexible hours and equal pay. The productivity goes up, the CEO loves the changes and the boss gets sent to Brazil to be a manager there.

Sadly, Bravo said, these idyllic workplaces are not the norm and she still hears examples of the same problems the women in the movie struggle with: losing out to men on promotions they deserve, being asked by the boss to do personal errands, and being sexually harassed.

Bravo's organization used to run a contest -- the Good, the Bad and the Truly Unbelievable, and she heard stories that make the boss in the movie seem tame.

"There was one woman who told us the boss asked her to wax the hair on his back,"

Bravo said. "And another one whose boss wanted her to help him enlarge some part of himself -- and it wasn't his brain."

But things have certainly improved since the film was made, Bravo said.

"We have names for every one of those problems," she said. "And we know how to solve them. In my book I give examples of what can be done and where they are doing it, and it's working."

Several times in "Taking on the Big Boys" Bravo exhorts her readers to believe they can make a difference. "And that means challenging ourselves to think big," she writes. "This can be hard -- we have so little practice."

Even small changes are a step toward the world with a 35-hour work week, time off to care for family members and flexible hours, Bravo said.

Bravo believes it doesn't take much for people to see it's better for their daughters, mothers, sisters and partners to get paid more or to not worry about being fired for taking time off to care for a sick child. In the women's studies class she teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, her students -- mostly older and working -- are far from fiery radicals when they walk in the door, she says.

"About 85 percent take it because they have a humanities requirement and they thought it would be easy," Bravo said. She wants to show them feminism is not about bra burning but about equality. In their second class they do an exercise listing negative and positive stereotypes for men and women. It makes them realize this is about them, not some abstract concept she says.

"That blows their minds," she said. "There are about twice as many positive stereotypes for men."

Bravo asks her students if they know their state legislators. Few do so she has them find out and write a letter about some issue they feel strongly about.

"They really get into the letters," she said. "Afterwards I ask if they can think of three people to ask to do the same thing and every hand goes up. They want to do it."

Institutional change is important as well as working on changing ourselves, says Bravo. This is a message she wants to get out in "Taking on the Big Boys" as well as in the classroom.

"People think they can only change themselves," she said. "For example, with rape, their answer is to not wear provocative clothing or not walk alone at night. Or the answer for lower pay is always to learn to negotiate better. But shouldn't there be some sort of systemic change? Wouldn't you want a fair system not based on just who is the slickest at promoting themselves?"

Finally, Bravo wants people to know that being a feminist doesn't mean not wearing makeup or hating men. To be a feminist just means not participating in the oppression of anyone -- and that is open to us all. As she writes in the final chapter of her book, "The Big Boys don't have a secret handshake, and neither do we."

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